United Nations S/2016/178

Security Council

Distr.: General
24 February 2016

Original: English

Letter dated 22 February 2016 from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to transmit to you the attached letter from the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (see annex).

I would be most grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Matthew **Rycroft**

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Annex to the letter dated 22 February 2016 from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

19 February 2016

On behalf of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, it is with great urgency that I draw your attention to the dire humanitarian situation in Aleppo and across northern Syria, ahead of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs' briefing to the Security Council on Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2209 (2014) and 2258 (2015).

Since 2 February 2016, Russian and Syrian forces have led a brutal attack on Syria's largest city, killing at least 129 Syrian civilians in Aleppo and deliberately targeting civilian infrastructure. The joint offensive has exacerbated the refugee crisis, forcing tens of thousands of civilians to flee towards the Syrian-Turkish border. Vital facilities have repeatedly been struck by intensified aerial bombardment. On 15 February 2016, air strikes destroyed or damaged six hospitals — including the only operational hospital in Azaz, Aleppo, and one primary health-care facility — including one operated by the Médecins Sans Frontières and one by the United Nations. The attachment to the present letter offers an overview of the harrowing humanitarian situation across Syria.

The attacks on Aleppo have heightened the civilian death toll and cut off health services to tens of thousands of people and medical personnel. They have also risked aggravating the sieges across Syria, with an impending siege of Aleppo threatening to condemn an additional 500,000 people to starvation. Already, over 1 million Syrians remain besieged in 46 areas across Syria, unable to access food, water and medical assistance. Siege Watch estimates that 96 per cent of all sieges are directly attributable to the Syrian regime.

The attacks on Aleppo, and the deliberate efforts to lay siege on this vital city, represent a gross violation of international humanitarian law, including Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2209 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2254 (2015), which demand that the Syrian regime "allow immediate humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need, in particular in all besieged and hard-to-reach areas". The deliberate targeting of hospitals and medical personnel furthermore represents a clear violation of international humanitarian law, including article 3, common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which explicitly demands special protection for the wounded and sick, and prohibits hospitals, medical units and health-care personnel from being the objects of attack.

On behalf of Syrian civilians in Aleppo, I therefore call on Member States to:

(a) **Condemn** the recent escalation of aerial bombardment on Aleppo by the Syrian regime and Russia, in addition to all indiscriminate aerial bombardment and attacks against civilians, civilian targets and vital facilities;

(b) **Break the sieges across Syria**, not only in the areas reached on 17 February, but across all of the areas currently being starved into submission. If the achievement of humanitarian corridors is not possible because of Syrian regime

intransigence, then it is imperative that Member States airdrop aid to Syria's 46 besieged communities;

(c) **Protect civilians from indiscriminate aerial bombardment**, including by enforcing a no-bombing zone to stop the indiscriminate air strikes across Syria;

(d) **Ensure accountability** for war crimes, including those perpetrated by the Russian Federation, and take steps to establish a special international tribunal for Syria, should Security Council paralysis prevent the referral of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

The attacks by Russia and the Syrian regime in Aleppo and elsewhere also run counter to ongoing efforts to achieve a political solution in Syria and a rapid cessation of hostilities. If any ceasefire is to be achieved, it is imperative that all parties — including the Russian Federation, which is now responsible for almost half of all civilian deaths in Syria — cease their indiscriminate attacks on civilians. It is unconscionable that an agreement ostensibly meant to lead to the "cessation of hostilities", such as the 12 February Munich agreement, not include one of the leading killers of civilians in Syria and a major driver of the refugee crisis. The failure of the international community to take steps to deter Russian and Syrian regime bombardment, protect civilians, or to demand that Russia refrain from its indiscriminate killing throughout Syria, will only condemn more Syrians to death and lead to the further deterioration of the humanitarian situation.

(*Signed*) Najib **Ghadbian**
Special Representative to the United Nations

Attachment

Civilian deaths, besiegement and detainment in Syria

January 2016

- **Total civilian deaths**: 1,085 civilians were killed in Syria in January 2016, according to the Violations Documentation Center.
- **Air strikes**: 70 per cent of all civilian deaths in January (or 762 of 1,085 civilian casualties) were due to air strikes, according to the Violations Documentation Center.
- **Barrel bombs**: At least 1,428 barrel bombs were dropped by Syrian regime forces in January 2016, killing 22 civilians — 7 children and 4 women — and damaging at least two vital facilities, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.
- **Other causes of death**: 117 civilians killed by shelling, 44 by shooting, 59 in detention, 37 during kidnappings and 23 in explosions, according to the Violations Documentation Center.
- **Russian attacks**: 49 per cent of all civilian deaths were caused by Russian air strikes, including 94 children and 73 women, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights; 57 per cent of massacres (or 33 of 58 massacres) were committed by Russian forces, killing 129 children and 65 women, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.
- **Attacks on vital facilities**: Russian forces were responsible for 46 per cent of attacks on vital facilities (44 vital facilities), according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Syrian regime forces targeted 34 vital facilities, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights; 16 medical facilities were attacked, 10 medical personnel and civil defence cadres were killed in January 2016 by Syrian regime forces and Russian forces, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.
- **Sieges**: Over 1 million Syrians are besieged in 46 areas across Syria, including Madaya, Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor and Idlib governorates; 96 per cent of areas under siege (or 44 of 46 besieged areas) are besieged by the Syrian regime, according to Siege Watch.
- **Detention**: The Syrian regime is detaining tens of thousands of people at any one point in time, and most deaths in detention occur in Syrian intelligence services, according to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.